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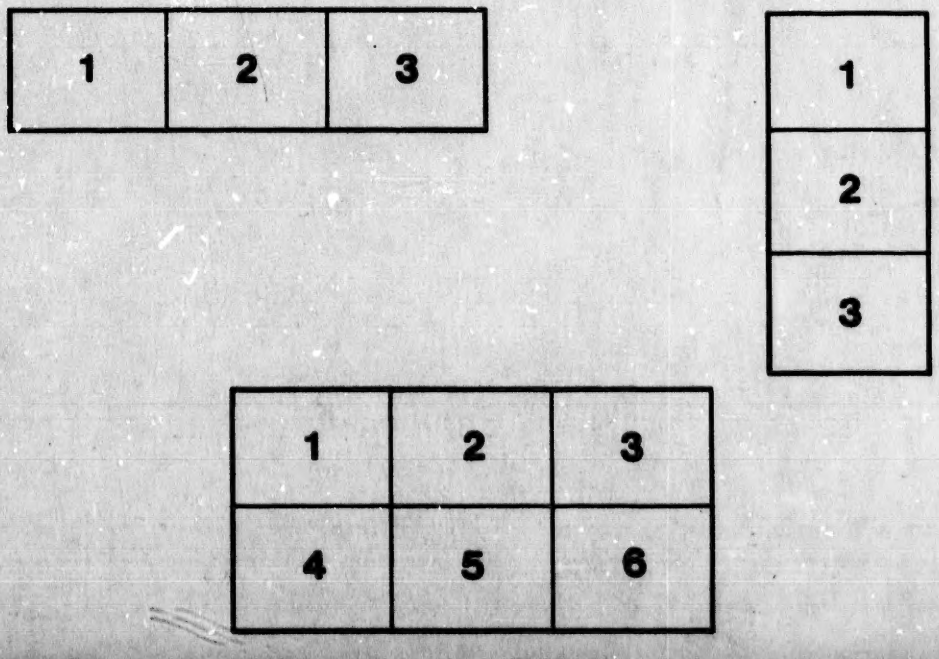

MIRACULOUS AGENCY

CONSIDERED AS A

BASIS OF RELIGIOUS OPINION.

A LECTURE,

BY JOHN MAHON, ESQ., B.A.

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DEDICATION.

To the Lord Bishop and Clergy of the Diocese of Huron this Lecture is (without permission) dedicated, because they are in some measure entitled to claim it as their offspring. It owes its origin to their unwillingness to acknowledge, perhaps their inability to appreciate, the great advances which the human mind has made, under the influence of sound criticism, increasing physical knowledge and unfettered opinion. The periods over which the Biblical records extend are marked not by retrograde, but by improved systems of belief; for each succeeding century of Jewish History from Abraham to Christ shows a growth and improvement in both the form and spirit of Religion and Worship; and it is surely not to be supposed that a final stop was put to all advances in Religious knowledge as soon as those records were concluded.

It will not be endured much longer, that narrow sectarian interpretations of the Scriptures, and rigid intolerance of differing opinions, shall be imposed upon believers as substitutes for those rational and enlarged views which are required as necessities by the existing condition of the world. Every enlightened well-wisher to the Episcopal Church of England must witness with extreme regret the melancholy spectacle it presents at the present time; torn with internal dissension —one section of it clinging with child-like tenacity to the tinsel gewgaws of rituals and ceremonials, whilst another section of it outrages the deepest religious sentiments of man by imputations upon God's Benevolence and Justice. Should this Lecture have the effect of recalling even a few to the paths of Nature, in their speculations upon religious subjects, the labours of the Lecturer will have been amply rewarded. Should he be disappointed even in this limited hope, he would wish it to be regarded as a respectful protest against the opinions, so hostile to civilization, taught from the pulpits of this Diocese.

MIRACULOUS AGENCY CONSIDERED AS A BASIS OF RELIGIOUS OPINION.

It will be admitted that there are many obstacles in the way of a satisfactory treatment of the subject of this Lecture. There is, in the first place, the difficulty of testing our proofs to the satisfaction of a reluctant audience, the difficulty of obviating the prejudices of custom, and the host of prepossessions and preconceived opinions which follow in the train of an inherited faith. Another great difficulty besetting the treatment of this subject, is to be found in the fact that by far the greatest part of mankind, carried away by imagination, feels an insuperable reluctance to be withdrawn from its influence into the paths of Reason and Matter of Fact. By what arguments, by what appeals, are men to be wrought upon, whose consolation and spiritual happiness are bound up with the doctrines and ceremonies of a religion founded upon miracles, and who consequently are persuaded that the glorification of God's name lies in super-natural rather than in natural agency. If it be asked why in the face of so many obstacles I ever thought of lecturing on such a subject, my answer is, that a man who is governed by a controlling conviction must of necessity disregard obstacles, and push on in spite of them to his object; in addition to which consideration, it must be owned that times and circumstances are now more favorable for inquiries of this kind than they used to be. Bold inroads are daily being made into the obscurest recesses of religious speculation; the dreams of many a theorist have been forced to succumb to hard facts; the circle of those who were formerly under the sway of mysterious feelings is constantly diminishing, while the circle of those who acknowledge the supremacy of Reason is daily extending. These things have made great changes, and augur still further and greater ones. Men are now more tolerant of discussion upon hitherto forbidden subjects, and they will listen with some degree of patience to what they would formerly have denounced as impious paradoxes.

You will sometimes hear divines and religious persons say that they have no objection to discussion upon subjects of this kind, provided it is conducted in a reverential spirit. Now, if by the word "reverential," it is meant to be implied that there should be an abstinence from all coarse and sarcastic language, from all opprobious or disrespectful epithets, I am of the same opinion with them on that matter; but if they mean to apply that term so as to place the slightest restraint upon the full and free investigation of facts and principles, I own I should not conceive myself to be at all bound to be reverential in that sense; at the same time I admit that good taste would require the avoidance of all direct and offensive application of peculiar individual opinions to the cherished theories and convictions of large masses of one's fellow-citizens.

Whether certain wonderful phenomena do or do not point to the secrets of another and a higher sphere—whether the mysteries of the inner spiritual life of man, which science cannot fathom, do or do not refer to that higher sphere,—these are matters upon which I am not going to indulge in affirmation or denial; neither have I any wish or intention to attack or seek in any way to disturb that faith in miraculous agency which claims to be directly derived from a supernatural source, as, for instance, from an immediate illapse of the Divine Spirit, or even from an irresistible intuition or instinctive feeling. With such direct channels of communication between Heaven and individual mortals, I presume not to meddle. So long as the advocates of miraculous agency confine themselves within the fortress of a heavenly faith, they shall be unmolested by me; but when they come forth into the field of natural and moral inquiry, and challenge discussion on these grounds, they ought not in justice to be offended if their challenge is accepted. When they assert that the principles of science are in perfect accord with a belief in the infraction or suspension of natural law, or when they maintain that miracles may be reasonably accepted on human testimony, they descend from the platform of divinity to that of natural and moral philosophy, and they must be prepared to submit their arguments to the tests and principles applicable to those sciences.

The sphere of supposed miraculous agency was much wider and more extensive in ancient times than in these our days of philosophical investigation. When a regular correspondence between the visible and invisible worlds was universally believed in, wonderful phenomena and singular events, not easily accounted for on natural principles, were at once referred to a supernatural source. Even natural lightning was then ascribed to the direct action of Jupiter. The progress of physical science and of the art of criticism has so far circumscribed our belief on this subject that the difficulty of obtaining general credit for future miracles bids fair to be all but insuperable. There is indeed an inferior sort of miracle, which may be called a natural miracle. Any extraordinary occurrence is called miraculous in the sense of a natural miracle; such, for instance, as the establishment of a railway or of an electric telegraph. There is around us plenty of miraculous things of this sort to excite wonder in us, independently of the miracles against which I am going to reason. You will often hear discussions among speculative people about the nature of life—about time or duration—about the creation and government of the world—about the substance as well as the origin of things. This universe, of which we form a part, is a palpable miracle in this secondary sense, and every change in nature is an inscrutible mystery to us. All that we know are the facts of change, how a cause produces its effect is incomprehensible; we see the seed and place it in the soil, we know that the sun and moisture act upon it, but how these produce the tree, foliage, blossom and fruit, is a question we cannot solve. Other phenomena are called miraculous, chiefly on account of their rarity. Such would be the submergence of a continent, or the rapid extinction of a whole race of people, but these things are miracles merely from the limitation of our faculties; they would appear very natural if we had more knowledge of nature, of ourselves, and of the Providence of God. There are two points of view from which even supposed supernatural miracles may be regarded in some sort as natural events; first, because they constitute a portion of human history, and next, because they must be referred to some general law, and be considered as a matter of philosophy as well as religion, inasmuch as they are found in all regions, and among all nations. I know, indeed, that we have invented

all sorts of tests by which we may discriminate, to our own satisfaction, the miracles of our religion from the miracles of all other religions, but without any success beyond our own circles, because the immutable principles of natural justice declare against any party being at the same time a principal and a judge in any case whatever, whether in law, in religion, or in common life. The late Theodore Parker, who profoundly investigated all historical facts bearing upon moral and religious questions, asserts that every known religion in the world, whether Fetichistic, Polytheistic or Monotheistic, has appealed to this same authority of miracles, and he thence concludes that miracles in favor of any particular religion can prove nothing. "The Jewish religion, according to the popular notion, began in miracles, continued in miracles, and will end in miracles. The Mahomedans tells us the Koran is a miracle, its author had miraculous inspiration, visions, and revelations. The writings of the Greeks, the Romans, the Scandinavians, the Hindoos, the Chinese and the Persians, are full of miracles. Above all, the Hindoo priests boast of surpassing the priests of the Christian and all other religions in the number, the magnitude and the antiquity of their miracles." And here I may observe, that miracles are generally marked by the characteristics of the people among whom they are wrought. The miracles of the Greeks were the product of a rich, lively and somewhat wanton fancy, whilst those of the Romans were generally political in their tendency, and were often moulded to suit some ambitious or national object. The miracles of what is called the Patristic period, that is of the first five centuries of our era, and also those of the middle ages, are of a peculiarly barbarous character. Many of the miracles of the old Testament have their parallels in Greek and Roman story. Bacchus, when marching from Egypt to the conquest of India, divided the Red Sea; and Josephus says that a similar phenomenon took place at the passage of the Pamphylian Sea by Alexander the Great, when it parted and gave way of its own accord to him and his followers, the very waves marking out a path in order that nothing should hinder the purposed design of God in the overthrow of the kindom of Persia. In a jovial mood the same hero drew wine from a rock by a stroke of his rod, and the sun and moon were arrested by him to serve a particular purpose on his march to India. The speech of Balaam's ass had many parallels in Heathen antiquity. The cows of Mount Olympus distinguished themselves by supernaturally inspired orations; the doves, the fountains, and even the oaks of Dodona, were known to deliver heavenly oracles; and Xanthus, one of the horses of Achilles, predicted his master's death before the walls of Troy. There is also a tale, similar to that of Jonah, related of Hercules, who was enclosed three days in the belly of a whale. Some of the Jewish miracles have, under the influence of modern investigation, shrunk from their original dimensions into ordinary occurrences or common usages. The supply of Manna to the Jews in the wilderness is no longer insisted on as a miracle. Josephus tells us that in his time it was found in great quantities in Arabia, and the plant that produced it is now cultivated in Sicily and Southern Italy. A similar fate has attended the once famous miracle "pillar of fire" and "pillar of smoke," which is now known to have risen from a common usage among eastern nations. It was a part of military discipline among the Persians and other nations of the East, when marching large armies through the deserts, to carry in the van during the night fires made with such combustible materials as would make a great flame, which was elevated so high as to be distinctly seen by all in the rear, and to appear in the distance as a "pillar of fire," thus serving to point out the line of march. In order to direct

this line during the day, such combustibles were burnt as to produce the greatest cloud or "pillar of smoke." This military usage is mentioned both by Herodotus and Quintus Curtius, and Alexander the Great himself adopted it from the Persians.

I will now proceed to a more formal discussion upon the principles of Logic and Philosophy—of the great question of miracle or no miracle. The first thing to be done in pursuit of our object is to define the meaning of the word "miracle." Now the meaning which I attach to that word in common language is this:—That it is something which is said to have been done which is totally opposed to all past experience; but, in order to avoid cavilling, I will define it to be the sudden reversal or suspension of some one or more of the ascertained properties of matter by divine intervention for a special purpose. Properly speaking, this definition belongs neither to logic nor philosophy; it is, in fact, a creature of theology. However, I am willing, for the sake of testing principles, to adopt it for the present. You will ask, perhaps, why it is that this definition belongs neither to philosophy nor logic. The reason is this:—Science necessarily rejects from its consideration both ultimate and penultimate agencies—both original self-acting agencies, and also derivative agencies, such as spirits, whether good or evil. Science can only concern itself with essential physical conditions, or material agencies, and these it is under the necessity of assuming, as the causes on which the uniformities in natural phenomena invariably depend.

Without this assumption it would have been impossible to carry on physical investigations to any useful purpose; it would have been impossible to make any progress in Natural Philosophy, in any of its various branches—of Mechanics, Chemistry, Physiology, Astronomy, Geology, or any other of the Physical Sciences. Neither would it be possible, without this assumption, to investigate satisfactorily the ultimate grounds of moral principles—in fact there would be an end of all well-founded trust in evidence and testimony, and all confidence in the very records of History. However, taking this theological definition for what it is worth, let us examine it with a view to ascertain its real value, and how it can be sustained by reasoning. You will observe that in this theological definition there are contained two distinct branches or parts; one of which consists in the assertion of a specific fact, namely, the reversal or suspension of some one or more of the known properties of matter; while the other is expressive of an opinion as to how that reversal or suspension was effected. In the eye of theology the hypothesis contained in this definition is much more important than the asserted fact, for this last is regarded by it as important only because it is a necessary medium for manifesting the interposition of Deity; and, therefore, it is that divines and theologians have manifested so strong a disposition to discuss the hypothesis before dealing with the fact itself. But, unfortunately, this can only be done in total disregard of the logical order, which requires that the correctness of the supernatural supposition should not be mooted until proof of the fact had been given, when it would be time enough to enquire into the causation of so extraordinary a phenomenon. But let the theologians act how they will in this matter, they cannot escape from the question which presents itself at the very threshold of this discussion, viz., can their definition be realized or sustained in either of its parts. If it cannot, if neither the asserted fact, nor yet the *a priori* hypothesis, can be substantiated, then must the notion of supernatural manifestation in any case be discarded as unfounded and chimerical. In this state of matters, three very important questions arise for our decision. 1st. Are miracles possible? 2nd. Are miracles susceptible of proof by human

testimony? And 3rd. What is the value of the hypothesis contained in the latter branch of the definition respecting divine interventions. 1st. Are miracles possible? The answer must be, they are possible in one sense, not possible in another sense; possible in a sense which is nothing to the purpose, impossible in the only sense that concerns us. Possibility is either metaphysical or physical. In a metaphysical consideration everything that is conceivable is possible. In this sense it is possible that the sun may cease to shine; that the earth may stop in its daily revolution; that a bullet dropped from my hand may ascend instead of descending. Any of these suppositions is as conceivable as its opposite, and, therefore, in a metaphysical sense, as possible. But as metaphysical possibilities are equally available on every side of a question, they are without force or value on any. We may, therefore, dismiss this possibility, and proceed to the other, namely, the physical possibility. Are miracles physically possible? The answer must be in the negative, for this reason, that miracles violate the law of nature, or, in other words, the law of matter and motion, and it is upon these laws that physical possibility depends. A miracle is physically impossible, because it attributes contradictory properties to the same substance, in other words, it is self contradictory. Let us illustrate this practically. Suppose that it is asserted by a person that he saw a ball of iron float on the surface of a body of water. What does this assertion amount to. To this: That a ball of iron is at one and the same time of greater specific gravity and of less specific gravity than water. It is of greater specific gravity, because it is a ball of real iron—for if it were not real iron there would be no miracle in the case—and it is of less specific gravity than water, because it floats upon its surface, which it could not possibly do if it were not of a less specific gravity. The argument which I am now pressing was illustrated by a late writer in the following manner:—"If (says this writer) a man comes to me with a number of others, and says, sir, myself and these gentlemen saw two men go into a blazing furnace, where they remained till they were red hot, when they came out again in a red hot state and quenched themselves in a pool of water. Here is a miracle; it is a flat contradiction to our experience of men and fire, and if this statement were true, it is argued that some power more than natural must have acted; but with this supernatural supposition we have nothing to do until the alleged fact is established. Now the proposition here is, that two men were in a furnace until they were made red hot by the fire, when they came out again in a red hot state and quenched themselves in a pool of water. Now, a man is principally composed of fluids, and one of the essential characters of these fluids is their expansibility into steam at a certain degree of temperature, and one of the essential capacities or powers of fire is, that of quickly changing such fluids into steam. Now if what appeared to be two men were not possessed of expansible fluids they were not men, and if that which appeared to be fire had not the power of burning and expanding fluids, we know that it was not fire. Now, in the case of this miracle, it is asserted that men, that is things which are susceptible of being burnt, were not possessed of this susceptibility, or else that fire, which possesses the power of burning, had not this power; so that there is necessarily a contradiction in the case; in truth, if the tale were stated without a contradiction, it would no longer be miraculous." If I were to say more upon this point, I should only darken and confuse it, and therefore I will leave it; but instead of going on to the point next in order, viz., the possibility of establishing a miracle by human testimony, I will postpone it until after we have considered the point involved in the second

branch of our definition, and estimated the weight and value to be attached to what Paley most illogically called the antecedent probability of God's intervention. An antecedent probability! Antecedent to what? Of course to the miracle or miracles specifically alleged to have happened. But apart from such specifically alleged miracles, where is the probability that can be pretended in the case? Oh! say our opponents, there is the abstract probability derived from the consideration that a God of goodness would not allow poor human nature to go on groping in darkness and error for want of a revelation. But unfortunately this abstract probability, or rather this abstract assumption, has only for its support another assumption, viz., that whatever the reasoning faculty of man may decide upon as fitting and necessary to be done by the Deity, in reference to mankind, that will the Deity assuredly do, and this assumption again depends upon another assumption viz., that the Reason of man is competent to guage the motives, intentions, and causes of action, influencing an infinite, incomprehensible Being like God; in other words, that man is in a position to comprehend and embrace within his view, not only all the relations of the Deity to this globe of ours, but also all his and our relations, to perhaps millions of other globes contained in the limitless expanse of the universe. The truth of the matter is, that this abstract probability, as it is called, is nothing but a baseless hypothesis, a mere naked supposition. I know, indeed, that hypothesis and supposition are sometimes very formidable things, as, for instance, when they are backed by the force and power of governments, and the accessories of horse, foot, and artillery, of racks, prisons, tortures, and other instruments for operating upon the outward professions of men; neither are they to be despised, when, as in the present day, they are only supported by social, civil, or political proscriptions; but, in the region of philosophy, they carry no weight, and in that of science, they are worthless, except as incitements to inquiry. What, in fact, is one man's supposition to another man? Nothing whatever. Has it any binding power upon his reason or his conscience? Not in the least. Those persons who are so fond of upholding the miracles of their own religion, and refuting those of their opponents, by attempting to show that the circumstances are worthy or unworthy, as the case may be, of Divine interference, seem to forget that when once we pass the limits of the natural, one thing is just as little susceptible of proof as another, and that the circumstances calling for the interposition of Deity are just as open to the judgment of the most illiterate peasant as to that of the profoundest philosopher, or of the most learned divine. To be sure the peasant, if left to himself, will probably give the preference to that miracle which is attended with the most startling and fantastical circumstances, while the philosopher and divine will sanction the miracle that presents a more plausible appearance, and is connected directly or indirectly with some obviously good doctrine, or some supposed moral or benevolent design; but these distinctions make no real difference in the cases; all miracles quoad miracles are equally unphilosophical, all equally objectionable in the view of science. I confess that my chief objection to this arbitrary introduction of the Divine Being upon the stage of human argument is derived from the consideration, that it has the practical effect of placing the decision of the most important questions of Religion and Philosophy at the mercy of brute force; for some how or other the predominant party is always sure to have God Almighty on its side, or, which is much the same thing, it has the means of forcing belief, or rather profession, into those channels most favorable to its own interests. I believe I might venture to assert, without fear of just contradiction,

that there is not one dogmatical opinion contained in modern theology, and receiving the general sanction of christians, which has not been the result of force, interest or corruption. The best attested miracles in all history are, perhaps, those that were wrought at the tomb of the celebrated Jansenist, the Abbe de Paris. Their reality was testified to by men of all ranks and conditions—by lawyers, judges, physicians, and literary and scientific philosophers; but the party in whose favor the miracles were wrought was obnoxious to the Court of France, and the Court of Rome, and still more so to the Jesuit party, which then ruled both courts. The Jesuits acted on this occasion like good politicians and men of the world, who, conscious of having the game in their hands, were resolved not to lose it by giving their adversaries a chance. They declined arguing the question, but ordered that the tomb at which the miracles were wrought should be enclosed by a wall—a proceeding which occasioned the following epigram to be affixed to the enclosure,

"De par le Roi, defense a Dieu,
De faire miracles en ce lieu,"

which may thus be translated into English, "Know all men by these presents, that the King, by his supreme decree, has forbidden God Almighty to perform any more miracles in this place;"—an epigram which shortly and pithily expresses the whole philosophy of this part of the case; for God Almighty is seldom permitted to perform any miracles but what are suitable to the views of the party in power.

Some of the most discerning of the theologians of the present day appear to be sensible that a strong current has set in in favor of the invariable uniformity of natural law, and therefore they are trying to find out some middle course, by which all arbitrary infractions may be excluded, and at the same time their favorite doctrine of special interventions may be preserved. With this view Dr. McCosh has entered the field with a new theory, by which he hopes to effect this desirable object. He has written a work, entitled "The Supernatural in relation to the Natural," and he there lays it down that there is a law for the Supernatural as well as for the Natural—for the Exceptional as well as for the Regular. "God" (says he) "has so arranged his physical agents, that general laws everywhere prevail, but he has also disposed them so that, by their combination and coincidence, crossing or collision, they produce individual incidents."

I shall not stop to discuss the question thus raised by Dr. McCosh, because I am not only quite ignorant as to the nature and conditions of the law he alludes to, but I am entirely without the means of acquiring any reliable information respecting it. While I congratulate Dr. McCosh on his good fortune in having such ready access to the regions supernatural, I must decline to follow him in his excursion beyond the skies. I will tell you, however, what is said of the Doctor's argument by a philosopher and a scholar—by one whose position affords a reasonable guarantee that he is not an infidel, being a Fellow of the Royal Society of England, and also a Fellow of the Geological Society of that country. I allude to David Page, whose admirable little work, on the Philosophy of Geology, was published in England about three years ago. After quoting the passage I have read to you from Dr. McCosh's work, he thus comments upon it. This is the merest juggling with terms. The exceptional is either beyond the province of law, or it is not. If it is beyond the province of law, it cannot possibly come within the category of science; if it is not beyond the province of law, it must be obedient to times and methods, however wide these times and complex these methods; and this is merely saying, in other words, that it is *natural*, but to us, in the meantime, *incomprehensible*. The *dispos*. of God's physical agents, which, by their combination or coincidence, crossing or

collision, is, according to Dr. McCosh's theory, productive of individual incidents—this disposal is in itself the very essence and establishment of law. If there be a disposal of these agents, such that they shall at one time or another, either by coincidence or collision, be productive of certain results, that disposal must be a predisposal and every predisposal is by its very nature an establishment of law. It is true, that by their wide departure from the general order, such phenomena may at first sight appear preternatural, but nothing resulting from a predisposal of agency can be supernatural, and the seeming anomaly arises merely from our own impotence to comprehend the nature and complexity of the producing causes. Once destroy the belief in the continuous operation of natural law, and appeal to "revolutions" and "cataclysms," and you present a world of disorder, a Creator without a plan, and the human reason will then strive in vain to elaborate an intelligible system from phenomena over which no system prevails." Such is the opinion of this able writer and true philosopher upon supernatural agency; aye, and such is the opinion of each and all of us, when our judgment is left to operate free from the influence of mystic impressions. Remember that the tens of thousands of miracles, of all the other various religions in the world, rest for their support upon this self-same hypothesis against which I am now contending. Now you have no hesitation in pronouncing this hypothesis to be utterly worthless, when applied to the support of their miracles, and the hundreds of millions of believers in those religions return you the compliment by pronouncing this same hypothesis as equally worthless when used to uphold the miracles of your religion. What is the value, I should like to know, of an hypothesis which is thus universally condemned in every instance where interest or prepossession does not prompt an opposite decision.

But what matters the mere unsoundness of a principle, in comparison with the frightful practical consequences that flowed from the triumph of this particular hypothesis. As there never has been, and never can be found, a true criterion for distinguishing a suitable miracle from one of a different stamp, men were necessarily left, in times when miracles were in fashion, to their own fancies, to choose what miracles they would accept, and what they would reject, as supports of the Christian system. The consequence of this state of things was, that in the days of superstition and ignorance, such a luxurious crop of barbarous miracles sprang up, that the law of nature was almost threatened with extinction. If I were to attempt to give you a hundredth part of the whimsical instances of asserted supernatural intervention, that were once universally believed in throughout christendom, and which it would have been death by stoning or burning to express a doubt of, I should trespass unwarrantably upon your patience. It would, however, be a great mistake to suppose that the ridiculous miracles I allude to were the mere offspring of Popery, for the germs of them had appeared coevally with the first preaching of Christianity. In the death struggle that took place between old Heathenism and young Christianity for the mastery of the world, (for that was the object of the contest, as it was to be the prize of the victor) each party vied with the other in the fabrication of absurdities. In the early period of our era, men made little difference between the natural and the supernatural. The Christians represented the heathen gods as evil spirits, who caused all the crimes of the world, and occasioned all public calamities, such as failures of crops, dearths, diseases, and all sorts of disastrous accidents. The Heathens were indignant at this wholesale denunciation of their religion, and, therefore, they resolved, about the fourth century, to collect and combine their scattered forces for a final assault upon

the whole Christian system. The Platonic, as well as the free-thinking philosophers of Heathenism, and also the initiated adherents of the ancient superstitions, exhibited their magical powers before the Christians, appealed to the oracles of their gods, to their mysteries and their miracles, and opposed a magical champion to every apostle and martyr of the Christians. Both parties paraded a long array of miraculous wonders, and claimed that their respective beliefs were visibly authenticated by their displays of preternatural power. Theodoret, the Church historian, relates amongst other incidents of this contest, that Marcellus, a bishop in Syria, in the 4th century, attempted, with the help of the prefect, to burn a temple of Jupiter, but a black devil always extinguished the flames. The bishop, however, caused a cask of water to be placed upon the high altar, and, after a prayer and the sign of the cross, the water burnt like oil, and the idol temple was consumed to ashes. Ennemoser, from whom I have taken some of the above particulars, says, in his History of Magic, that in the 8th century, the Heads of the Church found it necessary to invoke the influence of superstition, to enable them to impose upon the world their dogmatic theories, which they were then seeking to place upon a more systematic basis. Under their skilful management, the power and number of the devils grew just in proportion to the increasing numbers and authority of the saints, and it might be truly said that the devils at that period played the chief part in the world's history. Everything which deviated from common life was set down as sorcery, and every one who distinguished himself in any manner was condemned as a magician. There was some abatement of this excessive absurdity during the Crusades, in the 11th and 12th centuries; but in the 13th, upon the appearance of the Beguins, Lollards, Spiritualists, Waldenses, Texerants or Weavers, the insanity broke out afresh, and a regular crusade was directed against old women, who were considered to be demons disguised in the shape of toads and geese, while at the same time the devil was supposed to appear among the male heretics in the forms of tom-cats and he-goats. As every absurdity must have its theory among divines and theologians, Pope Gregory thought it necessary to give the philosophy of these strange appearances of his Satanic majesty and his subordinates. So, in a letter to Prince Henry, son of the Emperor Frederick, he lays it down, that as Christ's death had destroyed the inner person of the devil, he was reduced to the necessity of assuming such evil shapes as toads and geese, tom-cats and he-goats. The whole ceremonies of the Christian Church were at that time, according to the same author, directed to the controlling of evil spirits, and the discharge of justice consisted chiefly in the application of the Inquisition; and the theologian Raynaldus declares, that such numbers of men were at that period seduced to sorcery, especially in Germany and Italy, that the whole earth must have been laid waste by the devil, had not the guardians of the faith caused to be burnt some thirty thousand heretical sorcerers in those two countries. In the 14th and 15th centuries witchcraft rested on authority and law, on the spiritual and secular powers. An accusation made upon suspicion, or out of mere enmity, was held to be sufficient impeachment: this was followed by criminal trial, and the trial by the fire-death. It mattered not whether the accused confessed or not; in the first case he was guilty, in the second he was a hardened sinner. About this period lived Innocent the Eighth, one of those able Popes who possessed more ambition and policy than genuine religion. He longed to see the secular power of princes made subject to the sacerdotal principle, and he thought he saw his way to carry out his purposes through the means of a persecution to be set on foot against

witches and sorcerers. Accordingly he raised a great outcry against the evil practises of witchcraft, and as there happened to appear just at the time a book called the "Witch Hammer,"—so called, because in it the three authors or compilers of it professed to point out effectual means for crushing and smashing all witches out of existence—he took it and the composers of it under his especial patronage. By a Bull bearing date December 4, 1484, he created the three worthies his Commissioners for the carrying out of his beneficent purposes for the salvation of men. In this Bull his Holiness expresses his profound grief that many persons, of both sexes, forgetful of their salvation, should mingle themselves with demons and paramour-devils, devils using devilish arts to torment men and animals, destroying the fruits of the earth in vineyards, gardens and meadows. He directs his three Commissioners to expound the word of God in the affected parts of Upper Germany, to hunt out the sorcerers and to punish them by excommunication, censure and chastisement, by interdict, suspension and hanging. He orders his right reverend brother, the Bishop of Arasburg, not by any means, either of himself or by others, to make known publicly to the accused the charge against him; nor by any means to weaken or restrict the power of the said Apostolic Commissioners; nor to resist their orders, let the rank, office, privileges, nobility or consideration of the accused be whatsoever they might, under the penalty of incurring the indignation of the omnipotent God, and of his blessed apostles Peter and Paul. By the same Bull the Pope annihilated all the judicial forms heretofore deemed necessary for the protection of innocence, deprived the condemned of all power of appeal, and even himself of all power of pardon. With this besom of destruction in their hands, the worthy Commissioners went to work with a will, sweeping before them high and low, prince and noble, middle class, citizen and peasant, without regard to age, sex, or condition. A universal panic seized upon all classes of people, and thousands of innocent victims were consigned to the flames, in order that, amidst the general terror, kings might be made to tremble at the power of a Pope. Why have I gone into this distressing detail?—why have I dwelt so long upon these foul blots upon our common nature? Most assuredly I have not done so from any wish to lower or depreciate it in the eyes of my hearers, but I have done so in order to impress upon their minds this undoubted truth, attested by all experience, that man, by confounding the supernatural with the natural, and by thus losing the true perception of the natural law, sinks rapidly into intellectual darkness, loses the kindly and generous instincts of his nature, becomes an animal of prey, delighting in blood, and finally reaches that depth of callous wickedness in which he can even exult with savage joy over the dying agonies of his nearest, and of those who should be, his dearest kindred.

We will now proceed to the remaining question, which I proposed to discuss in connection with this subject of miraculous agency considered as a basis of religious opinion, can a miracle be proved by human testimony? We have already seen that Paley's alleged antecedent probability is a mere hypothesis, unsupported by either fact or proof of any kind; and we have also seen that a miracle is a physical impossibility, and therefore a non-existent thing in the eye of science and logic. This being the state of the case, it must appear a very superfluous proceeding to take up your time by entering into a labored argument to show that a physical impossibility cannot be proved by a merely moral probability—in other words that a heavier body cannot be outweighed by a lighter one. However, as this argument is different in form, if not in substance, from the one we have been considering, it will be worth

while to give a little attention to it. I would first warn you, however, against the common mistake of confounding together a fact, in its nature miraculous, and a fact which is only extraordinary and unaccountable. This caution is necessary at the present time, when many divines and theologians, in their anxiety to ward off or postpone the coming conflict between the principles of science and some of the principles of the popular religion, would so modify the definition of miracle as to destroy its nature and reduce it to a merely extraordinary event. But candor and regard for fair dealing compel us to reject these efforts at compromise at the expense of principle. The sacerdotal power having gained the mastery of the world, by means of miracles, cannot now be permitted to turn round and cashier that old established venerated word, and explain it away into an unmeaning sound; that would indeed be a shameful trifling with the convictions and feelings of mankind—a vile paltering in a double sense—it would be to apply to the principles of truth and religion the maxims of convenience adopted by the architect who knocks down the scaffolding when the building is erected. What is the difference between a miraculous event and one merely extraordinary? The distinction is this, that the miraculous fact necessarily implies an opposition to invariable experience. The event that is only of an extraordinary character does not imply anything of the kind. The miraculous event, at all times, belongs to the class of experimental facts; the extraordinary fact is not discovered to be of that class, until it has ceased to be extraordinary. I know that it has often happened, that men have been so situated as to be unable, from their ignorance and inexperience, to distinguish between these two very different things. But the unhappy circumstances in which men sometimes find themselves placed cannot alter the nature of things. When a fact, however extraordinary, but short of being miraculous, is alleged to have happened, such an alleged fact amounts to no more than this, that some property of matter not hitherto known has been discovered; or that some new combination of material forces has taken place, or else that some dexterous individual has availed himself of the known properties of matter, in such a way as to give the appearance of being miraculous to effects which, when displayed in their true character, are found to have nothing miraculous about them, except the skill and dexterity exhibited in their production. Suppose, that, long before the possibility of transmitting news by telegraph was dreamed of by the rest of the world, some few scientific persons having discovered the electrical secret, were able to supply correct information of transactions happening thousands of miles off in a few moments of time, and supposing that, on the strength of the apparently supernatural power implied in such extraordinary knowledge, a Divine mission to establish a new religion were claimed by them, and admitted by great numbers of people, is it not evident that such a religion would be founded on false pretences, and that the claim to Divine revelation would be a fraud? When Columbus was crossing the ocean, on his great voyage of discovery, he was able to quell a mutiny of his sailors by means of his superior knowledge of astronomy, which enabled him to foretell an eclipse of the sun that was to happen the next day. When the mutineers found that the event corresponded with the prediction, they immediately returned to their duty, and were ready to worship Columbus as a supernaturally gifted person. Suppose he had taken advantage of this disposition, to establish a new religion of his own invention, is it not clear that such a religion would have been merely human—the result of fraud and imposture? Suppose, again, that this room were filled with men and women, not one of whom had ever

heard or read of the wonderful feats of legerdemain, and that in such a state of ignonorance and inexperience, a skilful juggler were to appear amongst them, and perform some of those astonishing tricks, which can stagger and confound even persons who have often seen similar performances—is it not evident here, too, that, if the juggler should establish a religion on such a foundation, it would be an imposition and a cheat? In all these cases the occurrences in question are only natural events, though having the appearance, to uninformed persons, of being preternatural. Having cleared our path of this difficulty, which often encumbers the subject we are discussing, I now return to the question, can a miracle be proved by human testimony? This leads us directly to the celebrated argument of Hume—an argument which has so perplexed the orthodox, that they have been occupied ever since it was first started in efforts to refute it. They have sent forth against his little Essay almost innumerable answers, of all sorts—mathematical, moral, logical, mystical and philosophical, and all equally without effect. "A miracle," says Hume, "is a violation of the laws of nature; and, as a firm and unalterable experience has established those laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined, and, therefore, no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavours to establish." Although Hume was the first to present this argument under a precise formula, and to follow it out to its ultimate results, yet the principle upon which it rests had been tacitly adopted by several previous inquirers, and implied through the course of their reasonings. For instance, it underlies the whole of Dr. Conyers Middleton's very liberal treatise on the miraculous powers of the early Church. In one part of that treatise, having occasion to notice some very absurd miracles of the renowned Symeon Stylites which are recorded by the Church historian Theodoret, and for which said miracles a Church of England clergyman, Dr. Chapman, was stoutly contending, he proceeds thus: "Dr. Chapman, by contending that we have no better evidence for the very existence of Stylites than we have for his miracles, means, I suppose, that we have the same evidence for both, namely, the testimony of the same Theodoret, which he imagines to be as good in one case as in the other; *not reflecting that the same witness*, OF WHATEVER CHARACTER HE MAY BE, *will necessarily find a very different degree of credit, according to the different nature of the facts which he attests*, AND THAT THOUGH CREDIBLE IN SOME HE MAY BE JUSTLY CONTEMPTIBLE IN OTHERS." The same argument is directly and tersely put by Soame Jenyns, in his work in favor of the Internal Evidence of the Christian religion. He was contemporary with Hume, but whether his work preceded that of Hume or not, I cannot say. The argument I allude to is as follows:—"It is impossible," says he, "that history can afford us any certain proof of a miraculous and supernatural dispensation, *because a fact unlikely to be true can never be demonstrated by a relation that is possible to be false.*" The celebrated Cardinal de Retz announced a similar opinion when he said "that it was not necessary, in order to disprove a miracle, to be able to trace it through all the circumstances of knavery and credulity that produced it." Jeremy Taylor subscribes to the same principle in his Liberty of Prophesying. "Although," says he, "the argument drawn from miracles is good to attest a holy doctrine, which by its own worth will sustain itself after way is a little made by miracles, *yet of itself and by its own reputation it will not support any fabric;* for instead of proving a doctrine to be true, it makes that miracles themselves are suspected to

be illusions if they *be pretended* in behalf of a doctrine which we think we have reason to account false." Again, Bishop Newton, the great evangelical authority on prophecy, goes the whole length of Hume's doctrine, for he recommends all Protestant Christians to reject miracles, *nay, ten thousand miracles, let them be ever so well attested*, if they sanction any doctrines contrary to truth, reason or morality, and this advice he gives on the very sufficient ground that otherwise they would never have done examining miracles. Even so early as the fourth century, which was emphatically an age of miracles, St. Chrysostom adopted the sensible maxim of the Greek philosopher, "reasons for wise men, miracles for fools;" for he says in one of his works that "miracles are proper only to excite sluggish and vulgar minds, that men of sense have no occasion for them, and *that they frequently carry some untoward suspicion along with them.*"

I have always considered it a matter to be regretted that Hume should have adhered so rigidly to the resolution he had formed in the outset of his career, never to notice any animadversions on his works, nor to answer any of the arguments of his adversaries; the world was thus deprived of the advantage of seeing how so acute and original a genius would have unfolded, illustrated and enforced his own theory against the numerous objections levelled against it. To one of his opponents, Prof. Campbell, who had taken Hume's silence as a slight, he wrote an apologetic letter, in which he states in what way that argument had first occurred to him. "It may, perhaps, amuse you to learn the first hint of that argument you have so strenuously attacked, and you will probably think that it savours of the sophistry of its origin. I was walking in the cloisters of the Jesuit College of La Fleche, a town in which I passed two years of my youth, and engaged in a conversation with a Jesuit of some parts and learning, who was relating to me, and insisting upon, some nonsensical miracle performed lately in their convent, when I was tempted to dispute against him; and as my head was full of the topics of my treatise of human nature, which I was at that time composing, this argument immediately occurred to me, and I thought it very much gravelled my companion; but, at last, he observed that it was impossible for that argument to have any solidity, because it operated equally against the gospel as the Catholic miracles, which observation I thought proper to admit as a sufficient answer." Hume's essay would undoubtedly have given a death blow to miracles, had interest and prejudice stood aloof, and had candour and fair play been alone consulted. But the Clergy saw the loop-hole which his popular mode of treating the subject afforded them, and they did not fail to take advantage of it. They cavilled about the word experience, and they cavilled about the word miracle, until they succeeded in raising such a cloud around the subject that the original drift of the discussion was completely obscured and lost sight of; and this they did, although it was as clear as a sunbeam that they were themselves unable to advance a single step in their own argument without indirectly admitting Hume's definitions to be correct.

Those writers who have undertaken to refute Hume's reasonings on the subject of miracles, have almost invariably fallen into the mistake of supposing that he contended against the metaphysical possibility of such violations of the laws of nature; whereas nothing was further from his intention, or more repugnant to his habit of thought, than to speculate upon possibilities which, he owns, can never be fathomed by man so long as he remains ignorant of the ultimate springs of causation. What Hume contended against, and, in my humble judgment, successfully, is the *credibility* of miracles, or the possibility of establishing them upon

human testimony, for, be it remembered, that the abstract possibility of miracles, and the possibility of establishing them upon human testimony, are quite different things. He demanded the rejection of all alleged miraculous facts, on the ground of there being, from the constitution of the human mind and the circumstances in which we are placed, a necessary preponderance of argument against their credibility. The arguments from experience in favour of nature's uniformity he placed in one scale, and the arguments in favour of the truth of testimony he placed in the other, and as he found that the latter were outweighed by the former in a decisive manner, he felt himself compelled, as a reasonable being, to reject them with as little hesitation as he would an assertion contradictory of the evidence of his senses. Now, the question to be considered here, is not whether such a conclusion is reconcilable with the previous views of the great bulk of the Christian world, but whether it is or is not agreeable to reason, and favorable to the development of truth. Is it possible to entertain a doubt upon the matter? All the conclusions that we are capable of forming on matters of fact, are reducible to two classes, namely, such as are derived from observation upon subjects that are uniform, and such as are derived from observation upon subjects that are found to be various. Under the former class are ranged all our judgments upon the laws and common operations of nature, as the succession of day and night, the descent of heavy bodies and the like, and under the latter class are ranged our judgments upon all other matters of fact. Now the process by which we form conclusions as to facts of this latter kind, is by collecting together into one sum all those instances in which we have perceived them to exist in a certain way, and into another sum all those instances in which we have observed them to exist in a different way, and then comparing these sums together, in order to determine the ratio which they bear to each other. If the instances on each side be equal in number, we conclude that the general nature of the fact is uncertain; when they are unequal, we conclude that that is the more general nature of the fact, which is conformable to the side on which the excess lies; and our conclusions become so much the stronger, as the instances on one side are found to be more numerous than those on the other. To apply this rule to the case of testimony: as the instances in which testimony has been found to correspond with reality are more numerous than those in which it has been found to be at variance with it, our conclusions in favour of the truth of testimony in general, is to be considered as more probable than the opposite one, by as much as the instances of its correspondence with reality are judged to exceed those of its non-conformity with it—yet, as the instances in which testimony has been found to be at variance with reality are exceedingly numerous, there must, of course, be a proportional abatement of the credit that would have been due to it, had there been no such instances of variation. The whole fabric of our belief, except in respect of facts which are the immediate objects of perception, rests upon the assumption that the future will correspond with the past. Thus we believe that testimony in general will be true, because in general we have found it to be so, and in any particular instance we judge that it will correspond with analogous cases in our past experience. So far, our conclusions are unattended with serious difficulty, though still subject to be often mistaken. But serious difficulties do arise when this principle, or this assumption of the correspondence of the future with the past, is supposed to be upon opposite sides; on one side challenging our belief of an alleged act, on the ground of its being supported by past experience of the truth of testi-

mony—and on the other side challenging our disbelief of the same alleged fact, on the ground of its being opposed by our past experience in respect of the operations of the law of nature. This case, when analysed, amounts to one of opposing experiences, or rather of analogies of experience. Direct perception we are not supposed to have in either instance. When a fact deposed to by a witness is believed on the strength of his testimony, the belief is not founded on any perception we have of its conformity with reality, but upon the inference which our judgment, such as it is, draws from past perceptions. Men have no difference about their perceptions, but only about the inferences to be drawn from them. The agreement of testimony with reality, in a majority of instances, is an inference resulting from past perceptions. The utter incapacity of a horse, or a dog, to hold a rational discourse, is, likewise, an inference resulting from past perceptions. So far, there is no difficulty, because there is no collision. The difficulty arises when inferences, each of which is supposed to rest upon past experience, are found to be incompatible with each other, and it becomes necessary to reject either of them. For instance, it is asserted by a person, who, on ordinary occasions, would be considered trustworthy, that he heard a horse, or a dog, hold a rational conversation with a human being. In this case, while confining our views wholly to the inferences from past perceptions respecting testimony in general, and respecting the testimony on other occasions of this particular witness, we should be inclined to credit his assertion, and, consequently, to believe that such a conversation had taken place, but when we direct our attention to the inferences from past perceptions respecting the capacities of the lower animals, we are led to correct our first impression, and to disbelieve the testimony to so extraordinary a fact. In every such instance the conclusion we come to is formed upon a comparative view of the two experiences, that which we have, or suppose we have, respecting the character of the witness, and that which we have, or suppose we have, respecting the nature of the fact. When, in any particular instance, we disbelieve the testimony, we do so, or at least profess to do so, either on the ground of some specific cause of untrustworthiness on the part of the witness, or on the ground of some presumptive cause of untrustworthiness, arising from the nature of the fact deposed to. In the latter case, when no special cause of untrustworthiness connected with the character of the witness is perceptible, and yet the fact deposed to is of such a nature as to raise the strongest presumption of there being a latent cause of untrustworthiness on the part of the witness; in such a case the opposition of the two experiences creates a complication which enables the propagators of delusive systems to gain a triumph over truth and nature. In all cases of incompatibility between the assertions of men and the laws of nature, no hesitation could exist as to the choice of the alternative, if reason alone were allowed to guide us. In the experiments upon bodies, the result is simple, is open to inspection, and is always the same. But how are we to experiment upon human testimony? how are we to reach with certainty the secret motives that may actuate a man in giving his testimony on any particular occasion? Even where ordinary facts are the subject of it, the correspondence between assertion and reality is uncertain enough—what must it be in cases where miraculous events are concerned? Our conclusions in favour of the truth of testimony in general, must, therefore, fall short, in point of probability, of our conclusions in favour of the uniformity of the law of nature by the amount of the abatements occasioned by those countervailing circumstances affecting the credibility of the former, but not that of the latter. The quantum of probability in favour of the truth of testimony

may be ascertained by totting up on one side the supposed instances of its correspondence with reality, and on the other side those instances of its non-conformity with it, and then substracting the latter from the former, the difference giving the quantum required. On the other hand, the process for ascertaining the probability (or, more properly speaking, the certainty) of our conclusions respecting the operation of natural laws, is of a more simple and of a much more satisfactory character —a totting up of instances of uniform result with an opportunity of increasing the sum (if that were necessary) by as many experiments as could be crowded into the space of the longest life. Cast a ball of iron a million of times upon the water, in every case it will sink, not float—repeat the experiment ten million, or ten thousand million of times, and the result will always be the same. Take, on the other hand, ten thousand instances of testimony. In seven thousand of these it will probably be found to tally more or less with the fact—in three thousand not to tally. The probability in favour of the truth of testimony is, therefore, at the rate of seven to three—while that in favour of the uniformity of nature's law is as ten thousand millions, or ten thousand billions, to nothing. The probability in the latter case is always at the highest point of proof—that of absolute certainty—whereas testimony, varying from the confines of moral certainty to that of absolute uncertainty, the general probability in its favour cannot be more than average rate, and inasmuch as an average rate taken from two extremes cannot be equal to the highest extreme the probabilities in favour of the truth of testimony cannot, in the nature of things, ever equal the probabilities in favour of the uniformity of natural law.

It is to be observed that in thus taking together all sorts of testimony, or rather testimony upon all sorts of subjects, and giving the advocates of miracles the benefit of the average thus struck, we are dealing far more liberally with them than we need to do. All the instances in which testimony has been found to correspond with reality, have reference to subjects the very opposite of the miraculous, while there is not a single case of the latter kind which has been established beyond controversy. So that in every case of alleged miracle there is not only complete proof against it, derived from the nature of the fact itself, but also entire proof against it from the ascertained character of past testimony upon that particular class of subjects.

A natural question here presents itself, viz.: how happens it that when human testimony, and the recognized course of nature, come in conflict with each other, as they do in all miraculous relations, men should be so willing to adopt that side which has no probability whatever to support it against that side which is supported by absolute certainty. Surely there is here an apparent perversity in human nature that requires to be accounted for. The mystery will be solved by reflecting that, however ready we may be to reject the testimony of physical nature in favour of man's testimony, 'tis always under the implied condition, that the preference we give shall not be abused to the establishing of any thing for a truth or a fact that runs counter to our opinions, our interests, or our prejudices. All the religious parties that divide and distract the world are agreed in crying up testimony as the grand criterion for trying the truth of miracles, because each of them is sensible that it will stand in need of it for the support of its peculiar theories. This is all very well, so long as they confine themselves to generals. But as soon as they descend to particulars, and find that testimony happens to be on the side of an adversary, then the case is altogether altered; the law of nature then resumes its ascendancy and the reserves and limitations with which the word of erring man ought to be

received, are alone insisted on. A man against whom no special cause of untrustworthiness on the score either of capacity or integrity, can be alleged, deposes as an eye witness to a fact of a miraculous nature. Immediately the little religious world moving round the particular system of dogmas to which the supposed miracle is favourable, clamours to know on what ground a fact so satisfactorily proved can be honestly rejected—they boldly challenge investigation into the character of their witness, and in the event of its not being specially impeached, they triumphantly appeal to the truth of a religious system, authenticated by a miracle so irresistibly attested. In the meantime, strange to say, the convictions of the rest of the world are not in the least disturbed by this new and wonderful event; on the contrary, instead of being welcomed into the fraternity of miracles, it is treated quite cavalierly; it is pronounced to be a gross imposition, and its boasted eyewitness an impudent impostor. No inquiry, no investigation, is deemed necessary for this summary condemnation. In fact the seeming respect which is paid to testimony, is owing to its accommodating character in affording to every sect and party, a plausible ground for its belief of those doctrines which it has previously resolved to uphold. In the case of miracles, too, as in other cases, men are prone to judge by the result. The miracle of a triumphant religion appears, in the estimation of the world, as different from what the same miracle appears when the religion is obsolete or declining, as the potent minister of a great nation when at the zenith of his authority does from the same man after he has been contumeliously hurled from power. With what an air of authority does the miracle march forward that is going to support a prevailing religion; and with what shamefacedness and timidity it shrinks from the public gaze, when its patron religion is out of favour. The countless miracles that flourished in the palmy days of Catholicism, and were never questioned, were their pretensions one jot more legitimate than they are now? No, certainly; the laws of nature do not fluctuate, but men will not see the faults of a victorious party. As the world goes, the law of miracle is the law of the strongest; for nothing but force, physical or moral, could realize (especially in an enlightened age) such an absurdity as that of a miraculous fact being successfully established by human testimony. It is a law, or immutable condition of nature, that if two-thirds in volume of hydrogen be brought in contact with one of oxygen, whilst the two gases are in an electrified state, water will be the result. Now, suppose a person comes to me, and informs me, and is backed in his assertion by ten or twenty others, that he and they saw a man who, whilst he observed every condition of the experiment, produced, by his sole volition out of the contact of the two substances, wine instead of water, and he calls upon me to accept the miracle upon this testimony. Can I do so? Assuredly not, because the uniform production of water from the above experiment attests the existence of a cause uniform in its operation, a cause the existence of which never could have been discovered or established by mere testimony, nor by anything short of direct experiment; now, he who asserts that a miracle has taken place, asserts the existence of a counter cause of sufficient force to hinder or counteract the operation of the original cause, but unfortunately assertion or testimony is not the appropriate mode of proof in the case, either of a cause, or a counter-cause, for nothing can prove the existence of either the one or the other, but experiment duly made.

What a precious medley natural philosophy would be if the establishment of its principles were dependent upon mere testimony; why we should have as many and as many variable philosophies as there are prejudices, or interests, or fancies,

among men. The absurdity of trusting to assertion in matters of science was well exemplified by the proceedings that took place upon the question submitted by Charles II., to the philosophical society of his day. That waggish monarch requested the Philosophers to decide how it happened if a person took a vessel containing a certain quantity of water, and weighed it with the water, and if he afterwards put a fish into it, that the vessel, the water, and the fish would weigh no more than the vessel and the water did before the fish was put into it. The philosophers met in consultation upon this important question, and many solutions of it were proposed without any satisfactory result. At last one of the society, more skeptical or better informed than the rest, proposed that the fact itself should be tested by experiment; upon which all the other philosophers appealed to his Majesty's assertion, and even expressed their fears that it might be construed into treason if they denied or doubted it. But the skeptical member of the society persisting in his opinion, and alleging that even a king's assertion could avail nothing in a question of philosophy, the rest with much reluctance acquiesced, and tested the royal assertion by experiment, when they found that the merry monarch had been only (to use a vulgar phrase) taking a rise out of them, for it then appeared that the vessel, the water, and the fish weighed more than the vessel and the water, just by the weight of the fish. The old question I know will here be put; will you limit the power of God? Cannot God, the author of nature, alter or suspend his own laws if he thinks fit? Aye! if he thinks fit—that is the whole question, not to be decided by an appeal to his power but his will; and this drives us back again upon the antecedent probability of God's interference, which I have already discussed.

I have not said any thing in this lecture upon the subject of psychological miracles, that is miraculous effects produced upon the feelings and mental operations through the medium of visions, experiences, extasies, and other convulsive, throes of the spirit. I have abstained from doing so because these supposed miracles are not susceptible, either of proof or disproof, and are therefore undeserving of any consideration in a logical or philosophical point of view. Unfortunately, physiologists and psychologists have been much less successful in tracing the mental phenomena to their sources than the natural philosophers have been with respect to the physical, so that these marvellous and reputed miraculous effects still belongs to the department of mysticism, where enthusiasts and politically inspired religionists may safely parade all sorts of incomprehensible things without the fear of contradiction. You will often hear, from the pulpits of our town, many glorious things preached about the regeneration of the Spirit and about being born again, which would indeed be real miracles if they were true in any practical sense. You will also hear many wonderful things proclaimed respecting the effects of a saving faith; but you will never, I warrant it, be favored with any intelligible definition, or any tangible test, whereby you may distinguish the happy possessors of those inestimable blessings from those miserable beings who possess them not. If you will be advised by me, you will not press the clerical gentlemen for further satisfaction upon these points, for if you do you will probably be either put off with some unmeaning generalities, which may disturb your peace and harass your minds, or else you will be amused with some delusive indications, which, if you act upon them as true, may cause you very serious monetary embarrassment by leading you to trust where trust may be ruin, for between you and me the doctrines I am speaking of amount to something very like this: that piety towards God may

be perfectly compatible with a *quantum sufficit* of rascality towards men. Nothing can be more misplaced and unfounded than the lamentations which we so constantly hear respecting the want of faith now in the world. Credulity, not skepticism, has ever been, and probably will ever be, a leading characteristic of mankind. Neither nations nor individuals ever abandon long-established or hereditary systems of belief, until forced to do so by the pressure of over-ruling circumstances. Even now, when old creeds and old religious theories have, in a great measure, lost their primitive vitality, and whilst so many amongst us are sensible that these ancient institutions are now sustained from views of expediency and from the fear of consequences, rather than from a conviction of their truth, even now we are anxiously sighing for something whereon to pin our faith without compromising our understandings. Every man who reads history with reflection and intelligence, must be sensible that systems and institutions miscalled divine, because connected with religion, although more permanent than political constitutions, are yet not exempt from the principle of mutation and decay attached to everything human. The absurd and incomprehensible dogmas, as well as the selfish and grasping interests that gather around spiritual establishments, never fail to grow and accumulate until they smother and crush their supporters. Thus Heathenism fell under the weight of its fables and its absurdities. Judaism proved unequal to the burden of its rites, its ceremonies, and its priesthood. Ultra-Catholicism yielded under the pressure of the frauds and the follies it was necessitated to uphold, and more than one modification of existing Protestantism give tokens of a similar catastrophe from like causes. In fact, every system and every institution built upon any other foundation than that of Nature necessarily contains within itself the unfailing causes of decay and dissolution. Methods as unnatural and preternatural as those that gave birth to it must be continually had recourse to, in order to secure it any degree of permanence, and after all there will always remain an appeal against them to the physical laws of nature, which will prove too hard for them at last. In proportion as men advance in art, science, literature and civilization, the uniformity and durability of nature's laws will contrast more and more favourably with materials so frail and fluctuating as the speculations of human beings necessarily are upon supernatural subjects. In every age and country in which the idea is yet unrealized of the sequence of events founded upon the principle of invariable law, we must expect to hear more or less of the appearance of the Deity upon this earthly scene. But as soon as the true scientific principle is generally recognized, the old religious theory of causation will be disregarded, and the direct operation of the Deity will cease to be appealed to. In other words, the religious principle itself, varying with the spirit of the age, will, from having been the most passionate supporter of miraculous agency, ultimately become its deadliest enemy. If divines and theologians will ignore such facts and principles as I am now adverting to—if they will shut their eyes to the palpable changes, and the rapid progress of public opinion, in these matters—if they will persist in treating us like children, or semi-civilized men and women, still doling out to us old worn-out dogmas and threadbare metaphysico-religious subtleties; if they will continue on, regardless of all remonstrance and all entreaty, in this senseless course, they will soon have to face the inevitable consequences; they will be left stranded upon a desert shore, naked of all authority and influence, there to preach up the beauties of their obsolete theology to the tumultuous waves, while the rest of the civilized world, with other

eaders, and with happier prospects, will seek the consolations of a religion more consonant than theirs to enlightened reason and an advanced humanity. Then shall we be able to study the engima of our destiny, and to contemplate the doctrines of the immortality of the soul and a future state, freed from the horrors of inextinguishable fires—then shall we be able, not only to say, but to feel, with the last great patriot statesman of ancient Rome,—

"The soul, secured in her existence, smiles
At the drawn dagger, and defies its point.
The stars shall fade away, the sun itself
Grow dim with age, and nature sink in years,
But thou shalt flourish in immortal youth,
Unhurt amidst the war of elements,
The wreck of matter, and the crush of worlds."

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